

Approved For Release 2005/12/14 : CIA-RDP91-00901R000600410001-9
 1 (BOOK WORLD) WASHINGTON POST 15 December 1985

Victory at Sea: Bull Halsey at Leyte Gulf

BULL HALSEY

By E.B. Potter

Naval Institute Press. 421 pp. \$19.95

By Stansfield Turner

FLEET ADMIRAL William F. ("Bull") Halsey ranks with generals MacArthur and Patton as one of the most charismatic and forceful American military personalities of World War II. As commander in the South Pacific and later of the U.S. Third Fleet, he established a swashbuckling reputation for aggressive leadership. As might be expected, he has his ardent supporters and his vehement detractors. The author of this first full biography was once close to the ranks of detractors. Twenty-six years ago he wrote a draft chapter on the Battle of Leyte Gulf in which he said of Halsey's performance there: "Halsey made the wrong decision. In the light of what we now know, there can be no question about that."

The centerpiece of Professor E.B. Potter's fine biography is his balanced and objective view of Halsey's role at Leyte Gulf, one of the more controversial naval actions of World War II, where the American and Japanese fleets punched at each other in a running battle over several days in October 1944. Potter's even-handed treatment of why "Bull" Halsey exposed MacArthur's invasion force in order to do battle with enemy aircraft carriers is an important contribution of this book. The book's value is more than historical, though. Readers will find it well worth reading for the lessons it can teach us about how best to approach today's military problems. It was Halsey's basic philosophy of warfare which led directly to his controversial actions at Leyte Gulf. It was a philosophy that has always appealed to military men and in recent years it has become increasingly espoused by our Navy.

Halsey's philosophy in his own words was: "If I have any principle of warfare burned within my brain, it is that the best defense is a strong offense. Lord Nelson expressed this very well: 'No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy.' " Halsey's choice at Leyte Gulf was between what he saw as the offense and the defense. On the one hand he had the opportunity to seek out and engage what he believed to be the last remaining aircraft carriers of the Japanese fleet. On the other, he could have stood guard to ensure that other Japanese naval forces heading for Leyte Gulf did not overwhelm our forces there. The Army had just made the amphibious assault that commenced the fight to retake the Philippines

and was still moving men and materiel ashore.

Potter's portrayal of Halsey's earlier life makes clear why Halsey could only choose the offense. When he moved his ships away from Leyte Gulf in order to place his force "alongside that of the enemy," Nelson would have approved. So, too, would the great strategist of American seapower, Alfred Thayer Mahan, who felt that defeating the enemy's battle fleet was always the first priority in naval warfare.

There are, of course, strategists who believe that other principles apply; namely that a military commander should concentrate on achieving specific objectives, whether or not that necessarily involves destroying the enemy's military forces. Potter makes it clear that as a result of Halsey's following the principle of the offense, the immediate objective of supporting the invasion was placed in considerable jeopardy. Only the heroic performance of naval forces not under Halsey's command and ineptness on the part of the Japanese saved the day.

The U.S. Navy today is faced with an analogous dilemma as it develops its war plans for a possible major war with the Soviet Union. The Navy's prime objective in such a war would be to keep the Atlantic sea lanes open to Europe, just as in World Wars I and II. One way of doing that would be to seize the offensive and seek out and defeat the Soviet fleet wherever it is. Such a tactic would solve the problem once and for all, but would require our fleet to accept the risk of going into waters where the Soviet Navy is at its strongest. The alternative would be to take advantage of the fact that geography forces Soviet air, submarine and surface forces to come out into the wide Atlantic through the relatively narrow gaps between Greenland and Iceland and Iceland and Scotland. Waiting to engage the enemy there would be taking on the enemy where our strength is relatively greater, but a Halsey would not look on it as being on the offensive.

Potter lays out both of these philosophical approaches as they affected Halsey's choice of tactics at Leyte Gulf, without taking sides. While it would be nice to have his expert judgment on Halsey, his leaving it to us almost forces us to think through the pros and cons of the principle of the offense in possible wars in the Atlantic and elsewhere. The circumstances will never again be even closely analogous, but where one comes out on Halsey can affect whether one opts as uniformly for the offensive as our Navy is being urged to do today.

Potter does a nice job of providing sufficient detail to give a solid description of the battles in which Halsey was involved and, yet, not so much as to bog one down. Some readers will want to skim the descriptions of what various ships did in various battles, but that is not difficult to do. Some readers will find that the numerous anecdotes of Halsey's life and habits which Potter inserts almost at random gives the text an uneven flow at times. Yet, these vignettes contribute much to the feel one gets for the man. I do wish that Professor Potter

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had built more of a picture of Halsey the human being, not just the military commander. For instance, Fanny Grandy Halsey, his wife, darts in and out of the book and the admiral's life with almost no explanation of what must have been an unusual, distant marital relationship.

ANOTHER of Halsey's controversial characteristics that is brought out clearly in the book also has relevance today. That is how much military commanders should operate, as did Halsey, on intuition and impulse and how much on methodical, thorough appraisals of the balance of forces. Potter has unearthed interesting quotations from Halsey on occasions when his intuition drove his decisions. Some of them were his great successes. Today there is a prevalent complaint that our military officers are being trained to be "managers," rather than inspirational leaders, as Halsey clearly was. The feeling is that not enough Halseys who are willing to follow their hunches can survive in today's bureaucratic military establishment.

Potter comes close to direct criticism of Halsey in pointing out that his lack of the manager's penchant for careful analysis led him to two very faulty decisions on evasive actions in the face of typhoons. And, as we look out on the impact on warfare of modern technology, we have to wonder if there are not virtues in precision and thoroughness. After all, we are approaching the day when the time for response will be so short that the commander's decisions will be those he has thought out and preprogrammed into a computer.

Reading Potter's descriptions of Halsey's approach to decision-making in war invites us to reflect on the range of demands placed on today's military leaders. On the one hand there will always be a need for men who can inspire with Halsey's boldness and sense of initiative. On the other, the dictates of increasingly sophisticated technologies are going to demand the calm and thorough calculations of a scientist. ■

Admiral Stansfield Turner, former director of Central Intelligence, is the author of "Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition."